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O. HENRY'S LIFE AND POSITION

The publication of C. Alphonso Smith's *O. Henry Biography** is but an incident—though perhaps the most important one—in what is distinctively an O. Henry year. William Sydney Porter's only daughter has begun to carry forward the short-story tradition of the family, using rightly the inheritance from her father in the pseudonym Miss O. Henry. Fittingly named for a writer who so well knew and served these classes, an O. Henry room in New York is ministering to the discouraged and unemployed. The year 1916 further saw O. Henry pass definitively beyond the status of a one-nation writer with his rapid development into a best-seller in England. The latter fact, coupled with his enormous vogue among all classes of Americans, would seem to indicate that the O. Henry meeting, held in October under the auspices of Doubleday, Page & Company, was more than an assembly of those who knew Porter, more than a tribute to his memory; it was unconsciously a christening, an official public recognition of the literary immortality which was born the day he died.

It is but fair, however, to state that O. Henry, while approved by the majority, has a few staunch opponents. One writer in an interview hails him as master while another represents that he is not even to be considered as a writer of short stories. Our modern Lewis Carroll, the Canadian-New York humorist, Stephen Leacock, writes that when one has read "A Municipal Report" he "will either pronounce O. Henry one of the greatest masters of modern fiction or else, well, or else he is a jackass." On the contrary, in his bulky *History of American Literature Since 1870*, Professor Fred Lewis Pattee refers but three times to O. Henry, once to his "jugglery," once saying he "helped greatly to devitalize and cheapen" the short-story, and then: "With O. Henry . . . its author debauched the short story and made it the mere thing of a day, a bit of journalism to be

* *O. Henry Biography*. By C. Alphonso Smith. With ten illustrations. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Page & Company. October, 1916. \$2.50.

thrown aside with the paper that contained it." Such divergences of statement give a more than usual interest to a show-down of facts. According to the copyright holders, more than 1,500,000 volumes have been sold in a single widely advertised set. The books are also constantly on sale in various bindings by three American publishing houses. So, with their circulation when they first appeared, the Doubleday-Page estimate, that approximately two million volumes have been sold in America, seems a reasonable one. The twelve-volume set has long been available in England, and of a recent shilling edition of six of the volumes, 500,000 were sold in a few months. Professor Pattee's implication of ephemerality, surprising on its face, turns out thus to be unfounded.

Yet however enormous his vogue in his own language, O. Henry will perhaps never achieve great success in other tongues. France was the only European country in which he located a plot, and a small part of his work has been translated into French. In some of the stories there are slight if any obstacles to translation, but the majority are so individualistic in language and so permeated with local allusions that it seems too much to hope that the author will become a figure in world literature. Fancy a French translator striving to reproduce with fidelity such a passage as "enter you at the Golden Gate, hang your hat on Hatteras, your cape on Cape Horn and go out by the Labrador." This untranslatability was recognized by O. Henry, for in the first chapter of *Cabbages and Kings* he uses the device of a slang telegram which the English-speaking Spaniards cannot fathom: "His nibs skedaddled yesterday per jack-rabbit line with all the coin in the kitty and the bundle of muslin he's spoony about," etc. O. Henry could scarcely write a dull word, so a typical objection is against his slang and "vulgarity." It must be admitted that one is occasionally jarred by his use of foods, for instance, as a source of figures of speech. Dislike of this, however, may be due merely to a tradition of literary propriety. Many contemporary poets consider the lubricant in the grease-cup of a fly-wheel a better subject for poetry than the dew-drop in the eye of the violet. This school is hardly losing ground, so the

passing of a score of years may conceivably undermine the basis of this complaint against O. Henry. Yet the phases of life which he dealt with and the language he used stamp on almost all his work the label of the last quarter of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth centuries. For success in foreign tongues the stories of Poe—largely detached in time and place—are much more adapted. O. Henry's enduring popularity must be sought among English-speaking peoples, and the greatest appeal will be made to the people of the United States. Here, because of his unique and complete hold on the life of the nation at the turn of the centuries, his time limitation is rather a merit than a fault. He is the mirror of the period.

O. Henry's popularity in this country seems already established and his fame assured. He is *the* American writer, using the word American in its widest sense as of and for the mass of Americans. Someone has ascertained that his stories are localized in twenty states extending from New York to Arizona and from New Orleans to Montana. These fall further into three great divisions, the South, the West, and the city of New York. O. Henry lived in each of these localities and saw their life steadily and sympathetically. Free from any bias, he could draw well the South of traditions confronted by its environment of post-bellum reality. He disputes the West with Bret Harte, and from Washington Irving to Fanny Hurst he has no peer in the fiction of New York. He is the great social historian of that city. Moreover, in his works when region meets region, as in "Thimble, Thimble," he maintains a fifty-fifty balance, presenting equally the foibles and merits of both sides. We learn from the *Biography* that the ambition of Porter's life for several years before his death at the age of forty-seven had been to write the great American novel. If he had lived, that myth might have become a reality, for he alone had a grip on the whole nation. In comparison with him how preëminently of one locality seem Page, Cable, and Bret Harte, even Mark Twain!

Cabbages and Kings, the main relic of O. Henry's ill-advised trip to Latin America, is his only fiction of book length, and in comparison with his other volumes it was no large success. The work, however, is not to be taken too seriously as a novel. It is

a novel only in the sense that the five dramatized stories are plays, except that O. Henry did the novelizing. The stories were for the most part already written when he decided to give them their tenuous unity. Still the little Anchurian village of Coralio with its residents and its motley crowd of transients, its failures and its successes, is a not negligible member of the village-in-literature type whose usual examples are *Emma*, *Cranford*, and *Middlemarch*. The South American story, written by a Venturer, is quite in contrast with these records of English villages, written by women; but a human seriousness underlies its burlesque and it adds another assent to the proposition that any little hamlet has in it the elements of romance—provided they are woven together by a master. It has an additional interest as an early example of an increasing tendency, among our more robust novelists, to seek south of the Tropic of Cancer a substitute for our lost frontier. The concluding chapter is lamentably weak, and *Cabbages and Kings* may rank higher from its parts than as a whole, but the inferiority of the book scarcely dims its author's reputation. Though hundreds of novels are superior to this one, what short-story writer living or dead could safely be placed as assuredly superior to the man who wrote "The Memoirs of a Yellow Dog" and was also capable of writing "An Unfinished Story" and "A Municipal Report"?

O. Henry's geographical impartiality is matched by his range of theme and language. With a command of the language of literature, he knew and reveled in the slang of the day. One can sense in his pages his delight at not being a "highbrow." He knew the rules, yet he joyed in breaking them. His pleasure may be imagined in inserting into "Springtime à la Carte" the fling: "(In writing your story never hark back thus. It is bad art, and cripples interest. Let it march, march.)" So in "The Brief Début of Tildy": "Tildy was dumpy, plain-faced, and too anxious to please to please. Repeat the last clause to yourself once or twice, and make the acquaintance of the duplicate infinitive." This is almost enough to save a story, but the formula of Poe, advocated by the technicians, has no place for such facetious and irrelevant embellishments. At home in New York and Honduras, master of sublimity and slang, O. Henry

was a great democrat. He saw in the "four million" all the capabilities of tragedy which were formerly held to be associable only with those of high estate. But such stories as "Lost on Dress Parade" afford ample evidence that in remembering the "four million" he neither forgot nor maligned the "four hundred."

Dr. Smith's biography is eminently readable. The author is qualified not only by early association but by training and temperament to chronicle the life of O. Henry. The work seems done by one who is mentally an O. Henry kind of man. The style is uniformly pleasing and many passages achieve notable felicity of expression. Of Porter's silence when an apparently unjustified prison sentence had descended upon him Dr. Smith says: "He had his secret and he determined to keep it. He had been caught in the web of things, but he had another to live for and hope was strong and confidence still stronger within him. If a sense of pervading romance had buoyed him before his days of testing, it had not deserted him when he passed within the shadows. It had been not only his pillow of cloud by day, but his pillow of fire by night." This chapter on "The Shadowed Years" closes with a succinct appraisal of the value to literature of O. Henry's prison career—especially his position as night doctor of minor ailments: "In the silent watches of the night . . . O. Henry had come into his own. He had passed from journalism to literature. He had turned a stumbling-block into a stepping-stone. And his mother's graduating essay, 'The Influence of Misfortune on the Gifted,' had received its strangest and most striking fulfillment." An otherwise admirable book is marred, however, by a lack of proportion. The New York years when O. Henry was doing his greatest work are rather meagerly sketched. Perhaps because of innate reticence which increased as he grew older and, with his prison experience, would seem to have developed into a veritable covering of his tracks, O. Henry left little light on this period. Perhaps Dr. Smith felt as John Esten Cooke who, when he wrote his life of Lee, omitted a minute history of the general's later life, thinking that a cold and impartial exploitation would hardly be delicate when the family had scarcely recovered from

their sorrow. Again, as a scholar, the author may have had a very natural inclination to lay greater stress on what he actually knew, that part of Porter's life which no other biographer could have so completely handled, the Greensboro days when he and his subject were boys together. But whatever the exigency of the distorted proportion, it mars the biography as a work of art. The general reader, too, would be glad to exchange a goodly slice of the thirty-page chapter on "Ancestry" for a few more facts in regard to O. Henry's later life.

The chapter on "Favorite Themes" is worthy of detailed consideration. The great figures in our literature sometimes have a baneful influence. The lofty-looming Shakespeare threw such a shadow over the theatre that few of the dramatic buds that subsequently peeped out to seek the world's light could attain to even a respectable virility. Browning—instinctively a dramatist and a great one—failed within sight of success because he cast his product in the mould of tradition. Bulwer in the same way lost his higher opportunity. As a nineteenth-century drama *Richelieu* is out of place and time. Similarly nearly all short-story criticism has suffered from the famous dictum of Poe, laid down in his review of the second edition of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. Technique has been overemphasized. Even so versatile and unshackled a critic as Brander Matthews says, in *The Short-Story*, of Bunner's "A Sisterly Scheme": "It reveals Bunner's mastery of surprise, for the end of the adventure is unexpected by the reader. . . ." Now this may or may not prove true according to who is reading. At any rate it is a small point, aloof from a consideration of the real value of the story. Dr. Smith furnishes a quite different and superior evaluation. He pays due tribute to O. Henry's technique, but continues: "It is not technique, however, that has given O. Henry his wide and widening vogue. Technique starts no aftertones. It flashes and is gone. It makes no pathways for reflection. If a story leaves a residuum, it is a residuum of theme, bared and vivified by technique but not created by it. It is O. Henry's distinction that he has enlarged the area of the American short story by enriching and diversifying its social themes. In his hands the short story has become the organ of a social consciousness

more varied and multiform than it had ever expressed before." The whole chapter is a stimulating and valuable piece of literary criticism.

The new volume is a treasure-house for lovers of O. Henry's stories. "The Third Ingredient," for instance, is in part the history of a girl with whom the author shared her last stew and who, before he came back shortly after to invite her to a better meal, had gone away and left no address. The banking stories "A Call Loan" and "Friends in San Rosario" are steeped in autobiographical details. Veritable pictures of his past life are such passages as this from "A Service of Love": "At six he drew a picture of the town pump with a prominent citizen passing it hastily. The effort was framed and hung in the drug store window by the side of the ear of corn with an uneven number of rows." Such passages could be multiplied. O. Henry's life was a romance, stranger than a great deal of fiction. Dr. Smith points out that its successive stages paralleled those of his typical short-story. Yet aside from its interest as the record of an astounding career, aside from its solid intrinsic value as a composition, the *O. Henry Biography* will preëminently owe its permanance to the light it sheds on the twelve-volume life-work of the great writer of fiction who more completely than any other divined the heart of all America and whose pseudonym seems destined to become a household word among the one hundred million.

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